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ABSTRACT

Research findings at the National Center for Research in Vocational Education (NCRVE) document the practicality of a systems approach to transfer of skills from other realms to the world of the vocational training classroom and directly to the world of work. One of the targeted approaches specifically concerned with upgrading the status of women in the labor force is Project ACCESS. It is a research and system development study which has already focused on major obstacles to women's obtaining necessary counseling and training. In 1980, the project will begin to identify and assess skills women have acquired through homemaking, parenting, volunteer work, community service, and other life experiences; and to determine the relevance of these skills for 10 occupations and 10 vocational educational programs. On the basis of interviews with 100 women, prospective employers and instructors drafted a list of competencies required for success in each occupation or program. Approximately 300 women will take part in 1980, with 200 enrolled in vocational educational programs and 100 in on-the-job training programs. Goals will be met if the system results in recognition of women's experiential learning by a larger group of employers and educators, and assists women in entering new fields. (RC)

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THE IMPORTANCE OF RESEARCH ON TRANSFERABLE SKILLS TO FEMALE MID-LIFE CAREER CHANGERS

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THE IMPORTANCE OF RESEARCH ON TRANSFERABLE SKILLS
TO FEMALE MID-LIFE CAREER CHANGERS

The National Center is to be applauded for its leadership in research related to transferability of skills from the world of the classroom to the world of work as well as its efforts to synthesize the research done in recent years in the U.S. and abroad regarding the nature of skills that are transferable from one occupational cluster to another.

One of the major contributions of the Center to the growing body of reported research has been the publication of Douglas Sjogren's Occupationally - Transferable Skills and Characteristics: Review of Literature and Research (March, 1977) and Richard J. Miguel's Developing Skills for Occupational Transferability: Insights Gained From Current Practice (December, 1977) as well as Frank C. Pratzer's Occupational Adaptability and Transferable Skills (January, 1978). Their findings are of special import to a growing group of researchers who are concentrating on issues related to projected changes in the labor market for females in the 1980's and 1990's.

Alvin Toffler has warned us for a decade of the alarming growth of workers within unneeded or obsolete job skills. As early as 1969 he warned in Future Shock, that the worker entering the labor market in the 1970's would probably have to change jobs and job skill areas 4 to 6 times during his/her 20-30 career cycle. He argued in favor of major reassessment of the linkages between the worlds of work and education. In 1976 his view was seconded by the Committee on Vocational Education Research and Development of the National Academy of Sciences: "Because individuals can expect to shift occupations several times during their working lives, it is important to design vocational curricula that provide a useful basis for occupational versatility . . . vocational education programs should teach multiple and generalizable skills that will prepare people better for mid-career changes."

The findings reported in the NCRVE papers reaffirm the growing body of data that is being generated by researchers elsewhere who are seeking to document the practicality

of a systems approach to transfer of skills from other realms to the world of the vocational training classroom and directly to the world of work.

Systems or targeted efforts are of special import to those of us concerned with the status of women in the labor force and several are of note here:

Project ACCESS. Educational Testing Service and the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges. A three-year research and system development study funded by the Bureau of Occupational and Adult Education, U.S. Office of Education. The project will develop and field test a system to identify and assess the skills that women have acquired through homemaking, parenting, volunteer work, community service, and other life experiences. The relevance of these skills for ten occupations and ten vocational education programs will be determined.

Project HAVE Skills. Educational Testing Service. A two-year research and materials development project funded under the Women's Educational Equity Act Program. The project will develop a matrix showing the relationship between homemaking and volunteer work competencies and the skills required in a wide variety of paid jobs. Workbooks to assist women, counselors, and employers in understanding and using the matrix will be developed.

American Red Cross Project. A training program to help agency suprevisors assist volunteers with career and educational planning, using the "I Can" publication. Supported by a grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education.

Goucher College, Women's Management Development Project. A demonstration project, supported by a grant under the Women' Educational Equity Act, to arrange time-shared placement of women with extensive volunteer experience in internships for re-entry into business administration positions.

Northeastern University, Women's Career Program. A program, supported by grants from the Fund for Improvement of Postsecondary Education, to identify, train, and move women into management and professional positions by encouraging employers to include

generic competencies as well as traditional credentials in their criteria for hiring and promotion.

Catalyst. Resume preparation manual. A step-by-step guide for women. New York: Author, 1976.

Council of National Organizations for Adult Education. "I Can: A tool for assessing skills acquired through volunteer work." New York: Author, undated.

Ekstrom, R.B., Harris, A.M., & Lockheed, M.E. How to get college credit for what you have learned as a homemaker and volunteer. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service, 1977. (Developed under grants from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education.)

Northeastern University, Office of Women's Programs. The Women's Career Program: A handbook. Boston: Author, 1978. (Developed under grants from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education.)

Wider Opportunities for Women. National Directory of Women's Employment Programs. Washington, DC: Author, 1979.

It is an underlying hope of all of these projects to measureably contribute to the upgrading of the status of American women in the labor market before the close of the century. The current picture offers some stark contrasts.

During the 70's the numbers of females working for pay has passed the 41.1 million mark. Working women represent 41% of the labor force. Labor force projections estimate that 12 million more women will enter the labor force by 1990 - representing 1 out of 2 women over 16 years of age.

Unfortunately through social and educational inequities the 1976 median annual earnings of full time women workers was $8,312 -only 60% of male median annual wages of $13,859.

Educational inequities can be directly translated into economic consequences. The current median annual earnings of a female who has completed high school are $7,103,

that of a male is $12,260. A female who has completed 4 years of college earns a median annual wage of $10,519; a male with similar training $17,129. Thus a female with 4 years of college is typically paid less than a male with a high school diploma.

Key issues to be addressed in planning intervention strategies include:

1) What job categories are women most typically trained to perform? What are the economic consequences?
2) What are the most common patterns of labor market participation for females? How do these patterns limit females from upward economic mobility?
3) What are the family status issues to be addressed in redressing vocational education and labor force inequities for females.
4) What roles can and should vocational educators, employers, and unions play in the continuing search for educational social and economic equity for women?
5) What tools do we now have available to overcome previous inequities? What additional research and development programs are needed to assure equity?

Though the news media have headlined recent vocational and occupational "firsts", the majority of women in paid employment are concentrated in low paying, sex stereotyped jobs with few options for higher economic or social rewards:

Women are: 98% of all secretaries
94% of all typists
78% of all clerical workers
95% of all private household workers
64% of all service workers
less than 10% of skilled workers
less than 5% of top management jobs

Of 441 occupations listed in the Census Occupational Classification System, the majority of women are found in only 20.

Add to this discouraging picture the following: Of all workers in the U.S. who earn between $3,000 - $5,000 women account for 63%, $5,000 - $7,000 women account for 58%, over $15,000 women account for only 5%.

To this demographic profile one must add several elements which further focus our attention to the need for systems-wide approaches to the utilization of skills transfer concepts for increasing female upward economic mobility.

-The so called average family (father employed, mother not employed with two children) now describes only 7% of U.S. families. Mother works to keep the family fiscally afloat. Gone are the "work for pin money" days.

-There were 56.7 million families in the U.S. in 1976. 7.7 were headed by women. 1/3 of these families were designated as having income below poverty levels.

The family with more than 1 wage earner has become a prominent feature of most communities; in nearly ½ of all husband wife families both are wage earners. In Caroline Bird's recent study of dual career families she notes that the female in this type household is increasingly suffering from not just role stress but role overload.... she is frequently spouse, parent, student, employee and homemaker all at once without clear cut guidelines for career development.

The NCRVE project's findings make a strong case that transferable skills and characteristics should be among the more important outcomes of all student learning (Pratzer, 1978). These clearly go beyond the basic 3 R's generally posed as the essential task of education. Moreover, teaching for skill transfer and application seems to be an effective way of teaching the basics (Miguel, 1977).

Richard Miguel (1977) has reported many of the insights gained from the project's review of selected operating programs in schools and in businesses. Among his important findings was the observation that few, if any educators will deny the value of students becoming occupationally adaptable. Allen Wiant (1977) also reported positive perceptions and attitudes about adaptability and the transfer of skills among training directors,

union representatives, and personnel managers in a variety of business and industrial settings.

I heartily endorse Graham Herman's practical suggestions and techniques in teaching for learning transfer including:

1) Mastery level learning of material and/or skill
2) Recognition of the relevance of the original material or skill to a new situation
3) Ability to retrieve original material or skill by learning retention cues in performance of simulated job tasks.
4) Offer educational growth opportunities that include challenges to succeed or fail against known standards with feedback on performance.

The 1976 Carnegie funded study of 1166 Community College female students (Eliason, 1977) dramaticly underscores the need to improve vocational education's commitment to Pratzer and Miguel's premises.

In research currently being conducted by the staff of project ACCESS (Ekstrom and Eliason, 1979) there appear to be four major obstacles to the recognition of women's need for access to intensive counseling and training regarding the transferability of skills and aptitudes throughout their adult lives. These are:

I) Identification

Many women do not recognize that unpaid and non classroom activities are learning experiences of value in the classroom or on the job.

II) Articulation

Employers and educators may not perceive the linkages between experiential learning and the skills and attributes needed to perform on a job or in a vocational training program.

III) Documentation and Assessment

Appropriate techniques for determining and demonstrating the nature and extent of experiential learning have not been readily available.

IV) Financial Feasibility

Systems and tools developed to facilitate recognition of experiential learning must have benefits great enough to offset any cost to the employer or educational institution.

Project ACCESS addresses all ten of Miguel's (#120, p. 39) posits to the research community in its development of a system to identify and assess the skills acquired by women through homemaking, parenting community service, volunteer work and other life long learning experiences that will help them to succeed in ten occupations and in ten vocational education programs. It has two central goals, first, to facilitate the identification and assessment of job-relevant skills women have developed through work experiences outside the paid labor force and second, to obtain increased recognition by employers and vocational educators of the transferability of these skills to ten direct entry "growth" occupations and to ten vocational training programs in growth potential fields including many in non-traditional fields.

Project ACCESS hopes to achieve its goals through the development of a system with four basic components:

1) A Self Assessment Guide for adult women returning to work or school.

2) Counseling Aids to smooth the transitions between unpaid and paid work. This package will include materials for the individual and those who seek to assist her in the work or school setting.

3) Training Tools to assist women in making career choices based on the realities of the labor market projections. Special attention will be given to career choice information or better paying growth occupational clusters.

4) Assessment instruments and guides to assist employers and vocational admissions personnel to determine an appropriate match between the woman's personal competencies and those required for success in learning a job or in a vocational education program.

The ACCESS system will be field tested during 1980 and after analysis of the results and appropriate modifications, provisions will be made for its implementation.

In the development of its methodology the project has drawn on the excellent NCRVE research of Miguel and earlier efforts by Altman (1976); Ekstrom, Harris and Lockheed (1977), and Stolurow (1966a,b) on the psychological and educational factors involved in the transfer of learning.

One of the early tasks was to obtain a national sample survey of women from all socio-economic backgrounds to determine those applicable competencies that they had gained through life long learning experiences to generate a generalized competency list as well as to develop heightened insights into the breadth and depth of their experiences.

Over 100 women were interviewed. Convened in small groups at Displaced Homemakers Centers, Women's Centers, and community college counseling centers across the country, the sample was multi-racial and multi-ethnic. It included both urban and suburban women, ranging in age from the late 20's to the late 50's who had been full-time homemakers for several years and who had made or had been forced by circumstances to make a decision to pursue paid employment in the near future.

The women listed tasks they had done as homemakers, parents, volunteers, part-time workers, and participants in educational and recreational activities. Then they derived the competencies or skills they had developed from these experiences. Aside from nursing, child care, home maintenance, and inter-personal skills, many had competencies in administration and organization, electrical and plumbing repairs, construction, landscaping, gardening and plant care, writing and editing, and financial management and record-keeping, to mention a few of the frequently listed areas.

The Project ACCESS staff developed lists of direct-entry occupations and vocational education programs that met criteria prespecified by the Bureau of Occupational and Adult Education: These are all in fields for which the Department of Labor predicts a high demand; in addition half of the occupations are in fields which have not traditionally accepted large numbers of women.

The direct-entry occupations selected by Project ACCESS include: photo lab technician, collection worker, bank clerk, insurance claims adjuster, personnel/employee benefits

worker, insulation worker, airline reservation agent, homemaker/home health aide, social service aide, and floral designer. The vocational education programs selected will lead to careers as lithographers, welders, cooks/chefs, library technicians, plumbers, drafters, engineering and science technicians, credit managers, dispensing opticians, occupational therapy assistants, medical record technicians, and respiratory therapy workers.

Materials describing each of these occupations and training programs were collected, along with data on the demand for workers and typical earnings in numerous American cities. Project staff members interviewed employees and supervisors or course instructors representing each occupation or program at two separate locations or institutions. They obtained descriptions of the competencies needed for superior performance in each job or program and for promotion or exemption from required courses.

On the basis of the interviews with women, employees/supervisors, and instructors, a draft list of the competencies required for success in each occupation or program was prepared. These lists include relevant life experience competencies. These lists were rated by panels of employees or instructors in the occupation or program according to how important they perceived each to be for superior performance and for advancement. The raters were also invited to add any competencies they felt had been left out.

Using this data, the project staff will create competency profiles for each occupation and a set of techniques for assisting women to design personal competency profiles. These will emphasize their most fully-developed skills and areas of interest and will lead to the creation of a portfolio documenting the experiential learning and to the writing of an appropriate resume.

Another component of the system will be set of guidelines and techniques for facilitating the adult woman's entry or re-entry into the labor force and for orienting her to the opportunities and challenges of working in a non-traditional field.

Field Testing the System. The second year of the project will be devoted to a field test of the system described above. In the fall of 1979, a number of existing career counseling and placement assistance centers will be asked to work with the project staff in selecting women to take part in the field test. These centers, located in several different urban areas of the United States, will receive materials developed by Project ACCESS and training in their use.

These centers will supply the project staff with personal competency profiles of women who appear to be well-matched to the requirements of the occupations and training programs.

Cooperating employers and vocational education programs will also recieve materials and training from the Project ACCESS staff. These will enable them to use the personal competency profiles to make the final selection of women for the field test.

In January 1980, the field test will begin. Approximately 300 women will take part, 200 enrolled in vocational education programs and 100 taking part in on-the-job training.

The Project ACCESS staff will monitor the field test progress throughout the year. Data will be collected to determine what types of pre-training and supportive counseling the women find most useful, what barriers they encounter, and what factors seem most important to their success or failure in the job or vocational education program. Grades and supervisor's ratings will also be obtained to allow comparison of these women with other individuals receiving the same job training or vocational education.

The knowledge gained through the field test will be used to modify the system design as needed.

Expected Results and System Implementation. By the end of Project ACCESS,

in 1981, several products will have been developed. These include techniques for constructing occupational competency and personal competency profiles; methods of preparing adult women for entry into the labor force, particularly in non-traditional occupations; pilot data on the transferability of women's life experience learning to paid work in these ten occupations and the ten vocational education programs; and the identification of factors mediating successful and unsuccessful placements.

An invitational conference will be held to report on the development of the system components, the implementation of the field test, and preliminary results from the field test.

The goals of the project will have been accomplished if the system results in recognition of the relevance of women's experiential learning by a larger group of employers and vocational educators and assists women to consider a broader range of occupational possibilities.

Although only in the ninth month of the study, the research staff already recognizes the need for a continuing federal research commitment to the field of skills transferability. Key issues still to be addressed include but are not limited to the following:

1) Conditions that foster and/or impede the development of occupational adaptability and transfer for persons who are under employed or whose skills are perceived as obsolete.

2) Evaluation strategies and tools designed to assess the effects of learned skills or successful job moves.

3) Development of strategies and tools for older workers to utilize in anticipation of retirement or second careers.

The female career changer in mid-years has some special needs that relate to other NCRVE research priorities:

1) She frequently needs and wants vocational interest and aptitudes testing that is free from sex and age biases.

2) She needs step by step information on how to apply prior learning to the development of a systematic approach to job search. For many midlife career changers key elements in such job search are the utilization of functional resumes and the job creation skills described in the NCRVE project final report. Others need tools yet to be developed including:

a) A national directory of employers, educational agencies, unions and trade groups that utilize the concepts of transferable skills in the evaluation of credentials for mid life career change.

b) An analysis of skills clusters most valued by employers in selecting labor force re-entry employees.

c) Tools and strategies for overcoming employer biases that create barriers for female mid life career changers.

3) She needs to learn how to better translate home learned hobbies, skills and volunteer experiences into the role of successful entrepreneur. Although female owned and operated businesses accounted for less than 3% of the gross national product in 1977, women are turning to small business ownership in ever increasing numbers. A CWO/AACJC research and development project for U.S.S.B.A. indicates that female entrepreneurs are a largely neglected target population for vocational educators to better serve.

It has been a pleasure to share some of our research and development concerns with you today. Perhaps now that you have focused on the related economic and educational research issues surrounding the development of a broader acceptance of Skills Transfer Concepts and Practices it will be easier to address the related public policy issues that have been so long neglected.

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